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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PARLIAMENTARIAN CLAIMS NUCLEAR DEVICE
"UNGUARDED" ON TEST RANGE

Classified By: CDA Kevin Milas, reasons 1.4 (D) and (F).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A Kazakhstani parliamentarian created a short-lived controversy by alleging that there was an unexploded nuclear device lying unguarded on the "Azgir" test range in western Kazakhstan. The new Deputy Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources threw fuel on the fire when he confused Azgir with the Semipalatinsk test range and referred to trilateral efforts with Russia and the U.S. The Kazakhstani government acted quickly to set the record straight, with both the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issuing statements refuting the allegation and reaffirming Kazakhstan's status as a nuclear-free state. End summary.

¶2. (U) On February 14 in the lower house of the Kazakhstani parliament, Mazhilis member Tokhtar Aubakirov alleged that there was an unexploded nuclear device at the Azgir test site in western Kazakhstan. (Azgir is just north of the Caspian Sea, on the border with Russia.) Aubakirov, who was a cosmonaut during Soviet times, reportedly said that he had seen the 6-meter diameter object from space. He claimed it was a "nuclear device, just sitting outside" unguarded. Aubakirov made his comments during a hearing on an agreement with the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization.

¶3. (S) Channel 31 television reported that evening that in responding to Aubakirov's comments during the hearing, new Deputy Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Almasdam Satkaliyev referred to the trilateral agreement with Russia and the U.S. and said that the "kolba" would be removed. (Note: Since there are no ongoing CTR programs at Azgir, it appears that Satkaliyev confused Azgir with Semipalatinsk in eastern Kazakhstan, where work is underway to remove material left over from the Soviet nuclear program. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) On February 15, Channel 31 ran another story on Aubakirov's allegations. The reporter stated that the object Aubakirov referred to in Azgir was actually a 12-meter diameter metallic sphere which had formerly been used for the production of artificial diamonds. Channel 31 ran a picture of a structure matching that description. (Note: According to the NTI website, the Azgir test site houses "a laboratory for the synthesis of superstrong materials, which includes the Yava-1M installation for producing artificial diamonds." End note.) Satkaliyev -- presumably under the gun to correct what he had said the previous day -- was shown saying "There is a trilateral agreement between Kazakhstan, Russia, and the U.S. regarding the discovery of nuclear objects and their removal from the territory of Kazakhstan. There is no

nuclear warhead in the abandoned installation ... MP
Aubakirov's suspicions that for more than 10 years
Kazakhstanis and the international community were misled are
unfounded."

¶5. (U) The MFA also issued a statement on February 19
refuting Aubakirov's assertions, reaffirming that Kazakhstan
possesses no nuclear weapons, and denying the existence of
any fissile material at the Azgir test site.

¶6. (SBU) Other than the two reports on Channel 31, the
Kazakhstani press has so far not focused on the issue. Post
declined Channel 31's request to comment, given that the U.S.
has no role in Azgir and the GOK had already debunked
Aubakirov's claims.

¶7. (S) Comment: It is not clear why MP Aubakirov chose to
make such a wild allegation during the hearing, but he is
known for his grandstanding. It was unfortunate that
Satkaliyev raised the trilateral agreement rather than simply
refuting Aubakirov's allegations. Satkaliyev was appointed
Deputy Minister on January 24 and has obviously not yet
mastered all aspects of his brief. At this point it appears
that the press has not picked up on his "kolba" slip and
asked about trilateral programs underway in Semipalatinsk.
Should that happen, post will seek guidance from Washington.
End comment.
MILAS